

Happy and you know it? Understanding people's experiences and perceptions of happiness

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Contemporary British and Western societies seem to have become increasingly preoccupied with happiness recently. Words and messages about happiness are commonplace in novels, films and pop songs; we are constantly exposed to images of a happy life, and we are surrounded by suggested routes that we can take in order to attempt to obtain one. Not only have we seen a proliferation of the self-help book industry in recent decades, but we also have available to us a range of websites, videos and mobile phone apps that can help to guide us in the direction of happiness and fulfilment. In addition, we have the option of being taken there by qualified experts through a vast range of yoga, meditation and mindfulness classes that are now on offer. National governments are also taking a keen interest in the happiness and wellbeing levels of their citizens. Indeed, in the UK, the Office for National Statistics' (ONS) 'Measuring National Wellbeing' programme (<http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/user-guidance/well-being/index.html>), via which data of this sort are collected from a national sample of residents, is now well-established since its initial launch in 2010.

We have also witnessed a burgeoning of academic research on happiness and wellbeing in recent decades. Building on the existing philosophical literature on the topic, economists and psychologists have undertaken extensive research on both the key determinants, or causes, of happiness (see Layard 2005, for example) and on the brain functions that are required to experience it, as well as the mental, emotional and physical techniques that individuals can engage in to bring about increased feelings of happiness (see Seligman 2002). However, what has been missing from this body of research until recently has been an examination of the ways in which happiness is socially situated. In other words, how are people's everyday experiences and perceptions of happiness shaped by and articulated via social norms and cultural ways of understanding the world? My own recently published work has employed qualitative interviews with a sample of British adults in which questions such as this one are addressed. Participants were found to position themselves within a number of culturally-rooted discourses when articulating and making sense of their ideas surrounding happiness. In reflecting on what happiness 'is', they felt that it is a bodily feeling, something 'natural' and unique to an individual, rendering it immune and resistant to social factors. Simultaneously, they also located it within a normative framework in which exists cultural guidelines on the way in which happiness ought to be displayed and experienced; a boundary must be negotiated between not showing *enough* happiness and showing too *much*. An interesting tension also arose in interviewees' accounts; whilst happiness was frequently made sense of via a distinctly individualized, therapeutic discourse, interpersonal relationships were also accorded prime importance for experiences of happiness.

What is happiness?

Happiness is, in part, regarded by people to be something asocial. Many regard it as immune or resistant to social factors. For instance, it is often understood to be elusive; like other emotions, such as love, it is thought to be difficult to define and describe, knowable only with the assistance of some kind of psychological knowledge. Understanding one's happiness, for many, requires some kind of self-examination. It is also understood to be 'natural' and biological, originating from within one's body (which could be imagined as a 'container' for happiness). In this way, it is reified, or thought to

be something tangible and real. Understanding happiness in this way gives rise to the idea that it is one's own personal responsibility to be happy, and that dependency on factors external to one's body (such as medication or alcohol) for happiness is not desirable. The idea that happiness is 'natural' can also render it as unchanging across time and space; even if social changes (such as changes in consumption or marriage patterns) take place over time or across space, happiness that is 'natural' would withstand such changes. Happiness is also regarded as asocial inasmuch as it is thought to be an experience that is unique to every individual, despite the fact that a large number of people expressed this idea. What makes a person happy is understood to be something that contributes to their personality and identity.

People also locate happiness within a complex normative framework in which there exists a set of cultural guidelines surrounding the way in which happiness ought to be displayed and experienced. On one hand, 'positive thinking' is emphasized as something that has high societal importance. That is, happiness is seen as something that should be universally striven for in life, and, echoing ideas presented in self-help literature (Illouz, 2007), something that should be one's goal in adverse circumstances. On the other hand, however, people also recognized that happiness is something transient, and acknowledged that negative or unpleasant experiences are an inevitable part of life, therefore one cannot and should not expect to be happy at all times. Periodic feelings of unhappiness or misery are often regarded as beneficial in this way, as these allow experiences of happiness, when they do occur, to be recognized and fully appreciated. Therefore, whilst it might be deemed undesirable to be persistently unhappy (as this would entail a disregard for positive thinking), there is also an apparent skepticism toward persistent happiness. It is in this way that the display and experience of happiness is subject to a negotiation and 'balance' of implicit cultural guidelines.

Happiness, relationships and the individual

People often – although not always - articulate their ideas about happiness by drawing on a 'therapeutic' narrative. That is to say, they understand their experiences of happiness as being individualized, internal and self-orientated. This kind of understanding of one's feelings and experiences has its roots in the therapy and self-help industries (though this does not necessarily mean that people who situate themselves in such a narrative endorse or make use of these). In particular, the self is considered as having a specific relation to itself; that is, it is seen to be 'ontologically separate' from the individual (Hazleden, 2003), something that one can detach and 'work' on. Techniques can be performed in order to change or improve one's sense of selfhood. Echoing precepts that are frequently emphasized in the therapy industry, cultivating such self-care and self-knowledge is fundamental for being happy, and it is most easily achieved by establishing a 'healthy relationship with the self' (Hazleden, 2003:416). This is, then, another way in which happiness is understood as being something asocial. In this way, the individual is seen to be self-sufficient, and able to 'work' on their happiness without any assistance from other people or external things.

Thus, it appears that happiness is dominantly made sense of by people through an asocial lens. However, a competing way of understanding it is the idea that interpersonal relationships are an important aspect of a happy life, and this was also commonly voiced by the participants in my research. Indeed, family relationships and community and friends have been put forward by economists as two key determinants of happiness (see Layard 2005). However, what has not been acknowledged in their work is the way in which the importance of these relationships stands in tension with the idea that happiness is regarded as individual and asocial. That is, although other people are important for one's experiences of happiness, this is articulated via an

inherently self-orientated narrative. Loving and intimate relationships, for instance, are often described as a kind of 'disreality' (Barthes, 1978), disconnected from the wider social world, and sexual relationships can be seen as central to the satisfaction of a 'natural' and 'innate' drive. Nevertheless, people's understandings of the ways in which they draw happiness from other people is also undeniably social, as they regard themselves as being embedded in a range of social networks, which are a key source of support and wellbeing. A tension thus exists between social and asocial perceptions of happiness, and it is important that the roles of both the individual self and interpersonal relationships in people's experiences are theorized in a nonlinear and unstraightforward way.

Conclusion

Understanding people's experiences of happiness at the level of the everyday is important. It is a valuable source of knowledge for understanding our own happiness, and the way in which it is socially situated and made sense of via culturally-rooted narratives, and this offers an alternative perspective to that of the psychology-based, individually-orientated literature produced by psychologists and self-help authors, which is already in abundance. In addition to this, it can also enrich the statistical data that are being collected by national governments, which provide a more macro-level, general picture of happiness that is unable to capture everyday experiences. In this way, it can also help to inform government policies that seek to address citizens' wellbeing. For example, if it has been found that lasting relationships are important for happiness, programmes could be implemented that help to strengthen local communities and reduce levels of loneliness for many people. However, as people also dominantly understand happiness as something that is individual and internal to the self, social policy may be less able to address this issue. Happiness is a complex experience that cannot easily be partnered with straightforward and universal policy solutions, and it is thus important that caution is taken.

References

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Biography:

Laura Hyman is a Lecturer in Sociology at the University of Portsmouth. Her research centres on the sociology of happiness and wellbeing, with a specific focus on exploring the ways in which people understand and experience them. The arguments presented in this article can be read about it in more detail in *Happiness: Understandings, Narratives and Discourses*, published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2014.